

## **It's unfortunate that my movies never get outdated: Anand Patwardhan**

*Anand Patwardhan's documentary "War and Peace" was screened at IIT Bombay on 30th August 2009. There was a discussion session after the screening in which a fair number of IIT students participated and asked various questions to Anand. Anand answered each and every question with the same confidence with which he makes his films. He clearly spoke about the hoax of nationalism, the biased media and the hypocrite nuclear scientists. He discussed about our nation's security and concluded with his agenda of non-violence. Here we present the discussion.*

Transcription by Anirban Ghatak

*Do you foresee when you are making the film that what you are making is going to be very controversial or that might not be released or may take long time? And what do you think as more important? To reach the people? Or to present the truth as brutally as it is?*

I don't censor myself. But I avoid high theory and try to speak in a language that is understood. I try to ensure that whatever I say is full of common sense. If I can't communicate something that may be important, I don't do it unless I find the means to make myself legible.

Given the political situation that prevails I often know that my film is going to get in trouble. Based on that assumption I strategize. This film (War and Peace) was first shown at the 2002 Mumbai International documentary festival as this festival did not require a censor certificate. But when the film won the Best Film award the BJP got upset about it and immediately a Censor Board official owing allegiance to the RSS stepped in. Just before the film was about to be screened by Films Division in Kolkata, it was withdrawn under pressure from the Censor board. The Censors refused to give it a certificate without drastic changes. So I took them to court and eventually won the right to show it without a single cut, as I have done for every one of my films. What I say is legally not wrong and constitutionally okay, so they could never stop me. I also try to get my films telecast on Doordarshan (DD), and they always reject the attempt. So I take Doordarshan to court and have won every case. This started with "Bombay our City". I finished the film in '84, in '85 it won a National award, then DD rejected it. I took them to court and won and finally they showed it in '89. In 1990 with the film I made on Punjab the same thing happened, we won in the High Court; With 'Ram ke Naam', the same thing happened - finally they showed the film many years after the Babri Masjid demolition, in 1996. Then came 'Father, Son and Holy War', we won in the High Court, then DD appealed in the Supreme Court. One part of this film had an Adults Only certificate. DD argued that they cannot show a film with A certificate. The Supreme Court upheld a stay order but allowed us to go back to the High Court. So we went back to HC and won another case that stated that there can't be any blanket rule about rejecting A films on TV or else films about AIDS, or child birth, etc cannot ever be shown on TV and people would be denied important information. Again DD approached the SC but finally the Supreme Court ruled in our favour. The whole process took 10 years!

*In 10 years, a generation gap may arise. People may not have the same feeling they used to have 10 years before. How can you address that?*

I am unfortunate in that my films do not go out of date. If they ever did, I would have been very happy because it would have meant that problems like religious fundamentalism and injustice to the poor and powerless had been solved!

*Your film ended with the demolition of the twin tower, in that regard, what's your take on this War on Terror?*

This film was about to be completed when 9/11 happened, so I decided to put an epilogue in the film. My film had a message non-violence, but after 9/11 people would ask how to tackle people like Bin Laden? What do you do with terrorists? So I used a Gandhi quotation that states that those who believe in perpetually arming themselves would face doom even if victorious and only non-violence could show the way. The War on Terror is a disaster, it caused much more terror. The people who attacked the twin towers may have killed 3000, but the war on terror has killed hundreds of thousands... the illegal, immoral attack on Iraq which had nothing to do with 9/11...

*Any plan to make something on that?*

I made a 5 minute music video. I took a popular American peace song and merged it with censored photos of the Iraq war... It is up on Youtube. I do not have plans to work on this in greater depth.

*What about the global fundamentalism? We have seen in your film a lot about the subcontinental fundamentalism... what about the global one?*

I think they are all interlinked. If you actually want to analyze, start looking at the time when our country went back on the path of religious war, in the 1980's. At that time what was happening throughout the world? The Soviet Union was collapsing, American hegemony was taking over the world. Eastern Europe was breaking up, Yugoslavia disintegrated creating the Bosnia situation, the

religious and ethnic cleansing. In Afghanistan, a left leaning government was ousted by US backed Islamic militancy. We have seen on TV, US Secretary of State Brezhinsky telling madaras in Pakistan that their Jehadi duty was to fight communism; we became a pawn of the global empire game. I really have not done much on that, it is true. In this film I tried to critique the fact that we are learning jingoism and militarism from Big Brother USA...

*What about separatists? The violent movement and the violent resistance by the government?*

I made a film during the height of the Khalistan movement in Punjab in 1987. We followed a group of Sikh and Hindu who were spreading the secular message of Shaheed Bhagat Singh in the midst of sectarian strife. Regarding separatist movements in general, I am influenced by two seemingly contradictory ideas. If you believe in democracy, the people in an area have the right to choose where they want to be. Military force can't do that, for that is not democracy. If you agree on that then the problem is solved, but contradictorily, it may not be such a good thing for the world to get divided into smaller and smaller units. That increases friction between the units. Nationality issues would still come up, for a minority will remain even in a smaller nation, how do you address them? I do believe that non violence is the key. You start talking and stop fighting. Europe fought the worst wars in which 50% of it's population was killed. Today they stand voluntarily united. At the same time I believe that nobody has the right to keep someone in some marked place by force. Our greater leaders knew that from day one... Gandhi, Badshah Khan, JP knew that. The Kashmir issue...both India and Pakistan are oppressing Kashmiris. They need to break down the barriers between Pak held Kashmir and Indian held Kashmir. That can be done with the removal of the need for passports and visas. And that is the way of non violence...

*Friendship between nations... does it mean friendship between politicians?*

No. That means friendship of ordinary people where no politicians are involved. Friendship that will last is required between the people, not the harm-doers. I have experienced enormous friendship and warmth from the Pakistani people. The policy makers will lag behind the people, peace is too important to leave to the political class...

*What the people say in your film... and in their life... are those same? What is your experience? Like Abdul Kalam.. he may be a religious person...*

That's not the point... he may not even be the great scientist he has been made out to be. He is a good PR man. All his research on arms and missiles flopped, even recently we are told that the Pokaran tests also flopped. I am personally happy when nukes fail, but my fear is that they may just be saying this to test nukes again. Scientists like PK Iyenger have repeatedly demanded that India test again. So the lobby that is claiming that Pokaran 2 was a flop may be the hawkish lobby that wants to resume tests...

*Don't you think we should test, but should avoid the side effects. Everybody is testing, then why should not we? We will be proved as powerless and less important if we do not.*

Test what? You are talking about testing a bomb that can kill millions of people. In what way can the bomb help humanity? By decreasing the population? Reducing the harmful side-effects of radiation in the production stage is a secondary question, the primary question is, how can a bomb be useful to humanity? When you say everybody is testing, a maximum of 9 countries are nuclear weapons capable out of some 180 countries in the world. Your argument will encourage another 170 countries to test nuclear weapons. Ask your scientists to do a statistical analysis about what is the probability of a simple accident? It is a very high probability; it is by sheer luck that we are still alive. There were 250 occasions where the Soviet and US almost launched nuclear weapons on each other, a few times they actually launched and then called it back in time as it takes 25 minutes for missiles to cross over. 4 times during the Kargil war we came close to nuclear disaster. Between India and Pakistan, there is only a 2 or 3 minute gap. You can't call the PM and ask, you have to launch upon a rumour, and it can never be called back. It was Pokhran 1 in 1974, that forced Pakistan to make a nuclear bomb. They were just badly defeated in the 1971 war around that time. Pakistan was terrified and so they made nukes to match India. Now everytime we test a new missile, we push the arms race further. Every country can think in the same way, that as another country has the bomb, we should also have it. Nepal, Sri Lanka, every country can have it then, but that's not the solution. Create an environment of trust, that's important. Look at South Africa, the only nation to destroy all its nuclear weapons; are they less safe than us? No, they are much safer. When you don't have a nuclear bomb, you reduce the chance of an attack on you with nuclear weapons as there is no need, you are not threatening anyone. That's natural. Today you are afraid of China, but remember, China defeated us without any nuclear weapons in 1962. Even after they made nukes, these were aimed at nuclear nations, not at us, until we also made the bomb. Better destroy all your nuclear arms and you will be much safer than the nuclear states. And talking about security, we can't even protect Mumbai from 10 people armed with machine guns, think of having nuclear reactors spread all over our country. What if anyone gets hold of the plutonium. Have you thought about that?

*Do you believe the steps taken by the rulers of the country actually reflect the need and the voice of the people? I would like to believe that happens in a democracy, but does that really happen?*

It's very problematic to know which is the democracy and which the dictatorship. Some "democracies" manufacture consent ... thought is controlled by a small group of people with vested interests. I don't think any Indian made an informed choice about nuclear bombs. When was it decided by the people of India to make a bomb? Never. Which ordinary or even educated class knew what had happened? There are no critical debates. All we see on TV is gross propaganda to create a false feeling of nationalism. And they are pro-active to stop films like mine. First it was BJP, then Congress... then when I took them to court, they showed it on DD, but they publicly announced that it would play at 10 in the night, and instead showed it at 10 in the morning the same day. So whoever saw it, saw it by accident, not by design.

*You want your film to reach to the people, while you have resorted to the media of documentary film, that too in the form of "Imperfect Cinema", without all the conventional tools and conventional glow and glamour of a film. Don't you find it contradictory? Don't you think a feature about this would have reached a much wider audience?*

Firstly, while making a film, I never really bother about film theory. Growing up in the 60's and 70's, I was impressed by the films that documented liberation movements across Africa and Latin America. "Imperfect Cinema" was an idea that justified the aesthetics of a cinema without means, a cinema under attack and on the run. Our films happened to be imperfect because of lack of equipment and money. I couldn't afford 35 mm film, moreover that camera is too big, so I shot in 16mm on outdated film stock that others had discarded. Sometimes even on Super 8, later on Hi8, like that... What you see in the frame of my film is not an outcome of some great theoretical thought. If there is any Art, it is nothing conscious. Self-conscious art is more con than art. It's the integrity of purpose and the passion behind a film that may lead to art at times.

You are right that I may get a much wider audience if I chose to make a feature, but I may be a terrible fiction maker, because fiction requires a lot of managerial capabilities that I think I lack. Moreover, a documentary potentially has much more credibility than fiction. You think of Ben Kingsley playing Gandhi in Richard Attenborough's Gandhi, and think of Vitthalbhai Jhaveri's documentary, there's a huge difference in historical value. In fiction, you don't know what is imaginary and what actually happened. The answer is to popularize the documentary, not to convert docuwallas into fictionwallas. The challenge is to market the documentary, which was successfully done by Michael Moore. He proved that even a documentary can have box office success. As an experiment I released "War and Peace" in two multiplexes. The multiplexes gave us the slot due to heavy monsoons when they have low turnouts. We had to spend money because they didn't have video projectors. Still we had several houseful shows and recovered our costs. I believe if there is proper backing, films like these can definitely be commercially successful. I have now tied up with a company that will market my films in home video dvd format, lets see how it goes.

*What do you think about the indo us nuclear treaty?*

I think it's a disaster. Though I welcome the safety inspection part, these inspectors can also be fooled or may in fact let themselves be fooled when their bread is buttered right. Actually the peaceful and military nuclear programs are completely intertwined in India, so the same Secrecy Act which extends to nuclear weapons, also extends to nuclear energy. No one is entitled to ask questions about safety, cost, etc. All these questions are buried under the Secrecy act. As the Indo US nuclear deal opens the door of much bigger nuclear participation for our country, I think it's a disaster. I haven't done much research, but I understand that wind power is already creating more energy than nuclear power with very little investment. Why not to explore this and other forms of sustainable energy further? I am cautiously hopeful that Obama has the mandate to look at alternate energy though he faces giant corporations that push in the opposite direction..

*What do you think about the fate of right wing fundamentalism after this election debacle?*

See, I am not very sure that there is a real change of heart. It is just that the old communalism is not paying dividends. I do believe that people who openly proclaim their belief are less dangerous than those who change them at the drop of a hat. Those who demolished the Babri Masjid because they were Hindu fanatics will one day see their error but those who used it as a Machiavellian strategy to achieve power are incorrigible murderers. For this same reason I hold the secular Mohammed Ali Jinnah to be much more guilty of mayhem than his fanatical Muslim followers. So I am not sure of the situation after these elections. The strategy of the BJP is: Try Babri Masjid, if it fails try Godhra, if fails try something else. There is no religion behind any of this.

*We have not seen much of muslim or Christian fundamentalism in your film.*

I have shown glimpses of Muslim fundamentalism in 'Father Son and Holy War' and in 'War and Peace', and glimpses of Sikh fundamentalism in 'In Memory of Friends' our film on Punjab. But I think that self criticism is the best criticism. As a Hindu it is more effective for me to concentrate on and expose Hindu fundamentalism. I believe that when a Saeed Mirza or Tareque Masood makes a film against Muslim fundamentalism, that is going to work much better than me making such a film. Someday, when things are a lot better, and our own identities are no longer a limiting factor, we can feel free to critique anyone and everyone. I hope to see such a day in my lifetime.

Visit <http://www.patwardhan.com/> to know more about Anand Patwardhan and his works